

Salt Waste Tales: Ancient Temptation of the Zombie Butterfly

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Western Coast of the Salt Sea, First month of Grey Skies, 314 APW (After the Precursor War)

Eris Ella-Cyrus, The Raven of the Wasteland, stood at the top of the salt dune looking down at the remnants of the farming outpost as it smoldered like a pile of discarded pipe ash in the purple light of the fading day. The smell of bubbling man fat drifted up and mingled with the oppressive saline taste of the breeze. Cyri shook her head and spat to remove the taste of human barbecue from her mouth. She could not hear the fires. The whistling of the winds across the salt dunes sucked all sound away before the ear could catch it.

Behind Cyri, a woman wearing dun brown layers of overlapping cloaks and veils stood with an expectant posture.

"Will you do it?" Asked the woman, "People say you walk with the Great Wyrm of the Winter Sky. People say nothing can stop you."

Cyri didn't answer. The woman in brown watched the Raven closely. Eris Ella-Cyrus dressed in black with white and purple highlights, dyed leather and lacquered bamboo and precursor shell armour at the shoulders and helm. Her collar consisted of hundreds of black iridescent raven feathers. She had decorated her antique breastplate with ancient Raven motifs and with the actual skulls of ravens. The woman in brown shivered and looked away from the other woman.

"Please," the woman in brown continued, "My daughters, my sons, my husbands. Everything is gone. My tribe is dead. Our caravans stolen, and fields picked clean. They broke down the barriers, the fields are contaminated by the salt dunes now. Nothing will ever grow here again. Three generations of work reclaiming the soil and rebuilding the fertility of the land, all destroyed by a score of men and a handful of

war beasts. They took the corn to feed their beasts. They took the dead to eat for themselves. I have nothing left. I will be a scavenger now, a wanderer in the salt wastes."

Cyri spoke.

"Then why are asking me to hunt them down? If there is nothing to recover, what will you gain?"

"I want them to suffer," The woman said.

"Oh?" Cyri responded.

"They took my life from me. And they will do it again, to other families trying to heal the wastelands. They will tear away at those doing the work of the Precursors. And they will destroy these little spots of hope again and again. And they will do it to feed their war beasts for just a few more days or weeks. I gain nothing, because they have destroyed my ability to gain. People neither of us will ever meet will be the ones who gain by your actions. I'm not asking for my own benefits. I'm asking for others. All I get is vengeance, and that's about the same comfort as a handful of salt for the thirsty."

Cyri nodded, "Vengeance is a wagon wheel that rolls straight to the Blightlands. If you'd only wanted vengeance, I wouldn't be helping you now."

"So you'll do it?"

"Scavengers are scavengers the world over," Cyri said, "Doesn't matter whether they call themselves raiders or junk dealers, warlords or high priests; they're all parasites. And you deal with parasites the same way every time, you scrape them off or burn them out. What was the name of the gang? What was their sigil? Their banner?"

"Their banner was a circle of Five skulls and a wheel of fire. Black on red and white. They called themselves the Forgotten Dead."

Cyri nodded, "I don't know them, but somebody will."

"There is one other thing," The woman in brown added as she stared at her feet, "They seemed to be looking for something. They kept talking about a butterfly, screaming in our faces, demanding to know

where it was. I don't even know what they meant. There hasn't been a butterfly in a hundred years at least. Any butterfly still around would have to be a ghost, or a zombie."

The woman's voice cut off abruptly and Cyri noticed that the woman was now staring off into the distance. Cyri turned to look, but could see nothing of note.

"Whatever your zombie butterfly is, if it's important I'll discover its secret and if it isn't I'll find them all the same."

The woman lowered her eyes and refused to meet Cyri's gaze, "Yes, of course. Thank you."

When the woman in brown looked up she saw an empty space beside her, and in the distance the vanishing form of Eris Ella-Cyrus, the Raven of the Wasteland; Daughter of the Mad King Cyrus the Apostate and of the Warlady Vanora the Stone Wolf, as known as the Butcher of Brinebarrow.

1

Great Bazaar Inland Salt Sea, Third month of Grey Skies, 314 APW (After the Precursor War)

The Bazaar stank of eight thousand smells from chlorine sting of mealybug wax to the sweet iron tang of a dozen types of coagulating blood to the stink of more than fifteen hundred bodies perspiring in the salt air. Two dozen languages burbled and jangled and scraped and grated against each other, whispering and yelling, cajoling and bargaining and bickering. The sound of negotiation rose above the sheep skin tents and yurts and took physical form, a kind of violent reverberation that echoed like a tornado above the dun brown pulsing architecture of the bazaar.

Cyri had been tracking the Forgotten Dead for nearly two months now, and although physical evidence of their trail had long disappeared, survivors remained here and there who had pointed Cyri to the Bazaar.

The lacquer black of Cyri's armor and the banner mounted above her shoulders stood in sharp relief against the multitude of tans and browns and umbers of the bazaar. She stood at the edge of the bazaar watching the merchants and slave traders and scavengers and rag pickers scuttle about and ravage the

landscape in their mission to squeeze as much profit out of the blasted landscape as they possibly could manage before the land finally claimed their corpses.

The first scavenger approached, a young girl of maybe fifteen dressed in reds and blues caked mud brown and spattered with white crystals by the dust and sweat and salt. Discarded precursor coins had been re-purposed into beads and clattered with a soggy clanking sound against her skirt.

"Read your portents miss?" the girl asked, shaking a spruce root bag whose contents clacked heavily, "The slates know your future." she added when Cyri did not respond.

Cyri paused and looked at the girl. The girl shifted uncomfortably under the blank appraising gaze. Finally Cyri spoke, "When did you last eat? No lies."

There was pause, and then the girl said, "I think about three days ago, caught a peacock quail down by the good well- had it roasted in clay before any of the ganger boys could find and steal it from me."

"What do the slates say about when you will eat next?"

The girl grinned and dumps the rune carved slate disks out of the bag onto the salt, silt and sand at their feet. She looked down and her expression changed from a cheeky grin to confusion.

"Well?" Cyri asked.

"They say that a windfall comes, but not today. They say a windfall comes in the near future." The girl looked confused.

Cyri nodded, "They speak the truth then. If you can brave the salts, I have a treasure for you. To north, about two and a half day's walk, probably a little longer for you as your legs are shorter than mine, is a wreck of a house with a silo and a blasted husk of a barn. Buried in the salt to the east of the barn is a pile of salted meats. It's still good, or was when I left it those few days ago. I took my share and ate my fill and then buried the rest out fifty paces to the east of the barn under a series of grave markers that I moved from beside the house. I'll give you exact directions in exchange for your reading of my portents."

"How can I know you speak true?" The girl asked.

"Ask the slate." Cyri answered.

She scooped up the slates and let them fall again in a smooth practiced motion. She stared for a while and then nodded, before scooping the slates and letting them fall a third time.

"You're looking for people," The girl said after a quick analysis of the slates, "They aren't here, but you know that. You're looking for somebody who knows where the dead men go when they aren't killing."

Cyri didn't say anything and, after staring briefly at Cyri, the girl continued speaking, "They have no friends. The slates tell me that some of their enemies are hiding in the Bazaar. Seek the Serpent Folk; seek the men of the Cinder Scales. Trust not their words, but you know that. Trust not their intent, but you know that. The albino is the weak link who tries to look strong."

The wooden clank and clatter of a rickshaw approached from Cyri's left, and she looked up to see an umber skinned man with a shaved skull and a braided beard thick with red clay marching up what passed for a path.

"It's old Ashton here lady," The man announced, "You know me, and I know you. You be the Raven of the Wasteland. You be Eris Ella-Cyrus. You don't be liking your mother's name. You don't be calling yourself Eris Ella-Vanora. But that don't matter to me. I served your father, not your mother - when he was sane, begging your pardon. And so I serve you, now that you severed ties with her."

He paused, and Cyri nodded for him to continue.

"I got a message for you. It's a message from somebody who says they recruit for your mother. Say that you're to return home and take your place. Say that you can't run and you can't hide. You will take your place, they say. They say that you will know that consequences for continuing to run. I think maybe it's nothing you don't already know. But you must know what it means that they think they can catch you."

"Thank you Ashton. And yes, I remember you," Cyri said reaching into one of the goat skin bags belted to her hips and producing a small sheep's bladder purse and tossing it into the man's rickshaw, "Which of my mother's hounds is chasing me this time?"

"All of the big four, if the drunk I spoke to gots a brain in his skull: the Dragon Man, Cinnamon Girl, the Bone Man, and Seraphim. What you going to do with all of them here? You ain't beat any of them one on one. What you going to do with all of them here?"

Cyri looked back to the girl, "Do the slates say anything about where these serpents nest?"

"You going to ignore your mother's best hunter trackers? You going to act like they can't catch you?"

The girl considered carefully, "In the south of the bazaar I think. But I think your hunters are there as well. I think they know where you mean to be before you know."

"My mother never chases me. She gets ahead of me and waits. But I channel the power of the two headed Great Wyrm, and the dervishes say that I can do anything." Cyri said and then started her walk into the bazaar, "Thank you Ashton. And girl? You'd best start now. Word gets around."

2

Great Bazaar Inland Salt Sea, Third month of Grey Skies, 314 APW (After the Precursor War)

The bazaar had organized itself like an organism. The bazaar had a mouth, through which it took in new meat. The bazaar had a stomach, the dark underbelly where new meat was digested. And the bazaar had an anus through which the waste was expelled.

The south side of the bazaar was the anus, and there parasitic scavenging gangs squatted, clinging to the bazaar and picking off meat from among the waste expelled. Here, the Cinder Scales had pitched their umber red tents and raised their serpent skull banners.

In walking through the bazaar, Cyri had turned down the offers of three roach mongers, two prostitutes, six junk merchants, three slave traders, and one skinny man painting portraits using charcoal made from human bones. During the walk through the center of the bazaar, Cyri had felt forced to divert through three food stalls when she smelled roasted cinnamon in the air. She had stepped into three sales booths when she heard the clack of a hand counting out a meditation on a knuckle bone set of rosary beads. Twice even she had briefly engaged in bidding at slave auctions, sliding into the crowds as she smelled the expensive scent of amber, frankincense and vanilla incense. And once she felt it necessary to pay for a rent boy's brief attention when she smelled the distinctive smell of dragon's oil pipe smoke, using the scantily clad young man to block her own silhouette as she leaned into the shadows between two yurts. She knew that there was a better than average chance that her mother's hunters had not been fooled and

knew exactly where she now stood. She felt there was at least an even chance that they watched her now, as she stood before the umber red tents of this scavenger gang. She could do nothing about this, and so discounted it in large part as she listened to the sounds inside, which suggested that goats should not leave their drinks unattended in this part of the bazaar.

If she were watched by her mother's hunters, then she would make use of that.

She listened again to the tents, as great gasping and huffing sounds radiated out in waves from the tents from the tents, punctuated by cheers as regular as drum beats- regular that is if the drummers were very drunk. She counted at least seven different voices, all male, within the tents. Nodding to herself, Cyri reached into one of her hip bags and drew forth a flint and steel tied together on a catgut thong. She dropped to one knee and removed a small ball wrapped in paper with a twisted wick protruding from one end. Pulling a small pile of lint impregnated with mealybug wax from the bag, she struck the flint and steel together, catching a spark in the lint. She dropped the flint and steel back into her pouch and gently held the burning lint to the wick until the wick caught and began to shriek and burn like a panicking city man in a siege. She stood, and lightly tossed the ball into the main tent. And then she waited.

"It's a dragon pie! Run!" somebody inside the tent yelled, the voice higher pitched than it probably would have sounded under ordinary circumstances.

Men in various states of undress scrambled from the tent, climbing and charging over each other, pushing and clawing and biting in frantic looking motions. The paper ball burst into streams of spiraling trails of light with an ear popping series of miniature thunder claps. Several of the streaking bits of light burnt holes in the tent. They launched skyward before fizzling to bits of nothing, leaving sulfurous smelling trails of smoke marking their passage. Cyri waited until everything was still. The men of the Cinder Scale gang lay in a surprised exhausted heap before her, and looked up at her in varying levels of comprehension.

"I'm looking for information again." Cyri said, "And this time, you're going to provide it for free. Or I'm going to tell the Butcher's hunters what information you provided me last time." She crossed her arms as she spoke and stared at the thin, muscular and entirely naked albino who lay sprawled at the top of the pile. He was handsome, and Cyri enjoyed the view briefly, not a touch of fat on him, and well-muscled without looking like an over packed mule bag. He had a slender face and long platinum blonde hair that flowed far too perfectly for the bazaar or for a ganger of any sort. She noted that he wore eye shadow as well. She waited, leaving her face as blank as possible as she did while they absorbed her words.

One of the gangers near the bottom of the pile found his voice, "We ain't never given you nothing. Cinder Scales ain't no snitches, ain't never selling no secrets."

Cyri snorted and then pointed at the albino, "Speak for yourself and not for pretty boy there. He sells secrets; he sells more if he's short of hair care products."

One of the gangers snorted and another stifled a laugh.

"I wasn't asking you for information," Said to the ganger who'd objected, "You don't have anything to offer. I'm doing repeat business with pretty little butt cheeks here."

The albino pulled himself upright as Cyri singled him out with a casual wave. He snatched a cloth from inside the tent to wrap around his waist as he rose, "I've not sold you anything. I've never seen you before."

"Technically true," Cyri said, "You were bent forward in front of me when we spoke." She forced a smirk as she said it. The other gangers were staring at the albino in a kind of twisted fascination.

"That true Mel?" another ganger asked

"I've never turned no rent boy tricks." the albino named Mel insisted. Cyri observed that the expressions of his fellow gangers suggested that they did not believe him.

"It doesn't matter, you know." Cyri said, "Do you know who you I am now?"

The gangers looked at Cyri, appraising her as they extracted themselves from the human pile they had formed. Cyri noted the recognition as it began to form in their collective gaze.

"You're the Raven. You're the daughter of the Butcher; the Butcher of Brinebarrow." One of the gangers whispered.

Cyri nodded, "And her four best Hunter Trackers are hunting the bazaar right now. And do you think they'll listen to your screams of denial, if they hear that you betrayed the Butcher to her own traitorous daughter? Do think they'll stop to consider that you might be telling the truth. You think Cinnamon Girl is going to give up a tasty little morsel like pretty little butt cheeks here, because he might claim he doesn't know anything?"

Slowly, she watched as the gangers began to add up the collected bits of information she had scattered before them. Slowly, she saw them lose color as blood drained from their faces. She watched dawning horror express itself upon albino Mel's face.

"Unless you've got some big bad magic sword, you aren't going to like how that adds up." Cyri said.

She watched as Mel's face scrunched and contorted as he stared at Cyri silently. She said nothing. Instead she watched as he flexed muscles through his back and shoulders, rolling his shoulders as though loosening them for a fight. She smiled and shook her head. When the albino finally lunged at her, Cyri had shifted her weight back to rest up her left leg. As he closed with her, she brought her right knee up sharply into the young man's pale chin. Crimson spit sprayed from his mouth like an exploding mosquito. He screamed a muffled humming sound without vowels as he bit down upon his tongue.

"Not as pleasant to have me at your front instead of your back, is it pretty boy?" Cyri asked.

"Never had you behind me," Mel muttered as he spat blood from chalk white lips.

Cyri smiled, "Doesn't matter. Does it? It only matters what my mother's hunters hear. I'll tell you a secret." She pulled him into a choke and twisted him to face his fellow gangers, mock whispering into his ear loud enough that the other gangers could hear as well, "I have such a fierce reputation. And yet I can't beat any of my mother's four hunters in single combat. But they're all here, and all looking- probably for me. And the longer we stand here talking, the more they will assume was said. And thus, the more they will feel obliged to beat, slice and carve out of your pretty little pearly skin."

Cyri observed and shuffling of feet amongst the gangers that she judged to be the result of the gangers reappraising their situation.

"You're bluffing." Another of the Cinder Scale gangers said, pulling on a loincloth made of at three dead raccoons.

"Maybe," Cyri shifted balance and pushed Mel the albino backwards to regain some distance, "but that doesn't matter- because you can't handle me on my own. I could carve the information out of you myself."

She let a hand drift to side as though moving for a weapon, drawing attention to the fact that she hadn't needed one yet, "If I'm lying, then I have as much time as I want to beat the information that I want out of

you at my leisure. But if I'm telling the truth, then I'm on a schedule. And if you don't talk soon enough, I'll have to flee to escape my mother's hunters. And I'll have to feed you to those hunters to make my escape. And if you haven't told me anything, you'll have nothing to tell them to make the pain stop. So what do you prefer? Either way, you staying silent means more pain for you."

The gangers shifted again, and looked at each other with concern as Cyri continued.

"And a better question for the rest of you Cinder boys, is whether you're willing to stake that much potential pain on Mel's modesty about how he earns his walking around money."

"I didn't do nothing with you!" Mel spat, "They know me! They trust me!"

Cyri spread her arms and smiled, then shook her head.

"But do they trust you enough to endure unwarranted torture at the hands of the hunters, the hunters of the Butcher?" She looked at each other ganger in turn, "Well? Is he worth losing a few fingers over? Is he worth losing a testicle or two over? Is he worth losing chunks out of your eyelids? You better chose fast. Because I have to go, and then you'll have new guests to host."

A long pause hung in the air like a dandelion blossom on the breeze and then one ganger broke, "I ain't losing no balls for you Mel. What you want from us, you Raven?"

"You know where the Forgotten Dead roost. I want that information."

One ganger giggled, "You don't want nothing to do with Dead you know. They all in withdrawal. Run out of their zombie butterfly powder. You go there now, their minds ain't all good, they ain't all human. They all zombie brain and animal hunger."

Cyri considered this, "Zombie butterfly is a drug? Or an apothecary's potion?"

Mel wiped blood from his lips, streaking rusty drying blood across his forearm, "It's both. You're going to die if you go up there now."

"Well then, doesn't that strike you as exactly what you want to happen to me?" She asked.

The gangers considered this and then nodded to each other. Mel pointed further south, "They camp in the Camel Spine mountains, on the north end up in the cliffs. They can't hide their fires at night, cause they're either tripping or in withdrawal. Easy to find if you know where to look."

A deep honeyed voice full of stingers spoke behind Cyri, "Then they share that trait with the daughter of my lady." Cyri sniffed, they were downwind of her, but she caught the faintest trace of dragon's oil pipe smoke and Seraphim's overly dramatic incense.

"Where's Cinnamon?" Cyri asked without turning around.

"Guarding your escape route." The dry crackling voice of the Bone man answered from the north, from the route she'd taken into this section of the Bazaar. She mentally calculated. Seraphim and Dragon stood behind her along the western walk. The Bone Man had positioned himself on the northern walk. Two other trails headed east and south. Which was the one that Cinnamon expected Cyri to use?

"You think you have this figured?" Cyri said, "Don't you?"

"I do, as it turns out." Dragon answered, "You have never beaten us, not one on one, not as a unit. How ever will you escape?"

"I could slit both wrists and then fall on my spear." She said without emotion.

The Dragon Man didn't respond, no smug reply.

"So mother wants me alive? And probably doesn't want you to deliver me in a pile of broken bones either. You need me alive and you need me at least mostly intact."

"You still cannot defeat us." The Bone Man said, clicking his knuckle bone beads in a steady rhythm.

"No, but I can make you lose." Cyri answered.

"You ran away," Seraphim said, his high register lyrical voice coming just to the left of the Dragon Man, "You didn't fall on your sword in honorable fashion when you objected to your mother's orders. You won't do it now. You'll run away again. And we know you. Everything you know, you learnt from us or old Myrddhin. We know you. We know where you'll go."

"You didn't know I'd run away," Cyri countered, "You didn't know I'd have a problem with mother's orders. How will you know what I will do backed into a corner?"

Mel the albino tipped his chin up and called out in the direction of Seraphim and the Dragon Man, "There a reward for catching this broad for her mum?"

"Oh yes," Dragon answered, "The Warlady Vanora will be disposed to shower such people with her gratitude."

A moment passed, and Cyri assessed her options. Then the moment was over, and the gangers charged at Cyri in a shrieking howling flailing mass of arms and legs. Cyri scrambled and struggled, trying to maintain a defensible position in the mob of limbs when she heard the unmistakable bass drum hissing of a cassowary bird. She looked to the north and saw a great draft beast cassowary with its blue feathers shimmering as it sprinted past the Bone Man. The beast was harnessed to Ashton's rickshaw, which clambered along empty behind the cassowary. And the whole assembly thundered past, Cyri reached out and grasped hold of the frame of the rickshaw. The weight and momentum of the nine foot tall bird and its cargo yanked Cyri free of the struggling mob of flesh. The assembled mass of animal and timber continued to blaze a trail due south and Cyri saw Cinnamon watching, mouth open and eyes wide as Cyri plowed by mere hand widths from her position. Cyri grinned as she was dragged out of the Bazaar in a cloud of churned up dust and sand lice. Chitin and silica flew in her wake both marking her trail and obscuring her personally. She climbed up from to sit in the rickshaw, and after a few moments spent retrieving the reins, Cyri took control of the rickshaw and steered the cassowary towards the Camel Spine Mountains.

3

Deep Southern Desert, First month of the Monsoon, 314 APW (After the Precursor War)

The rains hit the lands of the great salt wastes and the surrounding regions for only three months of the year. They drenched everything, and then disappeared- swallowed up by a hungry earth that did not give the moisture back. The desert was soaking, and the sands were treacherous, giving way whenever the water and the sand reached some mysterious agreement and become almost liquid. Swimming in such a mud puddle was nearly impossible. Cyri fully intended to return Ashton's cassowary and took her time,

travelling very carefully. This could prove disastrous for her, she knew. Her mother's hunters would ride whatever mounts they commandeered into the ground to catch her. And they'd then walk her home across the desert if it came to that. Still, Ashton had lost nearly everything when he lost his position in the stables, and she wasn't about to make his generosity to her cost him further.

The rain pressed the usual smells of the land into the earth. All that Cyri could smell was rain. She would not know if the four hunters were there until they wished to her to know. The rain got into everything, leaving Cyri soaking and miserable from smooth round helm to soggy flapping moccasins. She could feel her body temperature dipping well into ranges where torpor lurked in the shadows. The Cassowary appeared unperturbed by the temperature as it nested beneath the chassis of the rickshaw between the wheels. Cyri still had trouble believing the beast could fit under the rickshaw, but it curled up beneath the rickshaw each night as Cyri made camp, so she had learned to accept it. Cyri herself had given up trying to bed with the bird for warmth, the beast would have none of that sort of cooperation. Instead, Cyri crossed her legs beneath her and made herself as compact as possible as she watched the Camel Spine Mountains from a distance of a quarter league or so away.

The Camel Spine Mountains weren't truly mountains. Though they had tilted considerably since the Precursor War, the Camel Spine Mountains could be immediately identified as ancient stone towers of the great golden age that had ended nearly four hundred years earlier. Erosion, wind and sand had filled in the structures. And although many balconies and rooms were still accessible, the structures were more landscape than architecture these days. The Camel Spine Mountains housed a maze of collapsed tunnels that could swallow the unwary. Cyri had no intention of poking her head in only to have it lopped off. She needed to know where she was to hunt. And so she watched and watched. Cyri had sat without food and only rain water for eight days. She focused her mind upon her patron spirit, the great wyrm, and her eyes upon the mountain range. Her stomach ached, and she had plans to devour whatever food stores the Forgotten Dead had sequestered in their hideaway. She meditated when she could, keeping her eyes open in soft focus. She kept her efforts focused on slowing her body to minimise the need for food while she waited.

She remained cold as she maintained her vigil, watching the whole of mountain range- looking for campfires. Evidently the Cinder Scale gangers had overestimated the carelessness of the Forgotten Dead gang. Or perhaps the Forgotten Dead had pulled through their withdrawal symptoms and had become more careful as the mysterious Zombie Butterfly had left their systems. Or perhaps they were dead, or had moved on to a new campsite.

Finally, on the twilight of the eighth day, Cyri saw a light on the north most spire of the Camel Spine Mountains. The flickering light of an open flame illuminated a ruined room turned cavern about five stories up the tower turned mountain. Cyris stood, stretched out cramped and tired limbs, and shook the phantom biting of a thousand insects out of sleeping limbs. The cassowary noted Cyri standing and pulled itself out from under the rickshaw and shook a spray of rain and damp sand from its feathers, fluffing and shaking its plumage several times before presenting itself at the front of the Rickshaw. Cyri harnessed the bird to the rickshaw and set off with little preamble. The rickshaw was impractical, even dangerous in the damp sand. But cassowaries disliked being ridden, and had impressive talons with which to pass their displeasure on to the would be rider. The rickshaw wobbled into motion and Cyri and the cassowary headed to the base of the mountain.

They found the gang's war beasts easily, sleeping metal hulks resting in the lee of a series of eroded buildings. Cyri slipped in and took a knife to the beast's tires and twisted open their stomachs to let the rain and sand into to clog their guts and stop them from going to war. Then she hid the cassowary and the rickshaw further in the lee of the building, out of easy viewing should any of the gangers wander back. Preparations complete, Cyri began to climb up the mountain of assembled straight lines and right angles, moving along roughly parallel as she aimed for some hypothetical perch overlooking the spot where she had marked the fire.

"Alright," Cyri said, as to herself as she climbed, "Let's go remind the Forgotten Dead that dead men stay buried."

4

Camel Spine Mountains, Second month of the Monsoon, 314 APW (After the Precursor War)

Two men stood on a balcony that had listed to an awkward angle centuries ago. The men appeared to have listed to awkward angles themselves. They both held heads in hands and appeared to have minimal interest in keeping any sort of a watch. They wore red armor built of water hardened leather plates and leather sandals, but little else besides their loincloths. Cyri slid the spear from her back and unhooked her banner, snapping the clasps of her banner to her belt. She crouched on the lip of a stone balcony just above the two men. She tensed and then uncoiled into a springing pounce that brought her slamming down upon the first man- spear point driving through his clavicle into his chest cavity. He spat blood as

the spear found his lung. Cyri let go at that point leaving the man to flounder and drown as his lung filled up.

She turned her attention to the other man, who had turned and had already begun screaming an alarm call as he scurried into the safety of the cavern rather than face Cyri. She drew a forearm length throwing dart from a leg harness and flung it under hand into the man's back. The weighted tip popped through the front of his torso between two ribs and he spun in a dainty little spiral before collapsing and sliding downward across the angled floor. Neither man had died yet, but neither would either be attacking her from behind, and so she left them.

She drew forth two more darts, holding one in each hand. Three more of the Forgotten Dead climbed through a crumbling doorway into the room. Cyri dispatched two with her darts, thrown cleanly through each man's sternum.

The third was just registering the demise of his comrades as Cyri slammed the blunt head of her tomahawk into his nose, collapsing the bones there and spraying blood and mucus across his leather tunic. The force of the blow tipped the man backward. Cyri also took a step back to gain range, and then brought the tomahawk's head chopping down bury itself in the man's face. The head of the tomahawk splitting the skull down the middle and cleaving the already damaged nose into two ruined pieces as weapon passed through the nose to enter the skull and brain.

The body hit the ground and Cyri planted a foot on the body's shoulder and wrenched the tomahawk from the skull.

"The Cinder boy was right, withdrawal and animal instincts." She whispered to herself as she yanked darts from the cooling corpses, "Not like that makes a hunt harder though. Three done. Let's find a few more."

She noted a whisper of a smell, smoke on the wind: incense. The rain made detection difficult. The smell might indicate Seraphim, or it might indicate that the gangers used incense to make their drug use palatable.

Cyri didn't hold much hope for the latter being relevant. If she was smelling incense, the chances were good that it was because Seraphim wanted her to smell incense. The four hunters deliberately used sound and smell to aim their prey. They could be practically undetectable should they choose, and their affectations were all strategy- designed to give false hope or drive prey along a desired flight path. In any

case, none of this mattered to Cyri for a moment. She shrugged the thoughts aside, to be addressed when her promise of vengeance was fulfilled.

She found three more men sleeping in piles of filthy rags and killed them silently with her skinning knife before continuing on. In the kitchen she put a dart through the skull of a man who had apparently been attempting to drink away his withdrawal symptoms. The kitchen however, provided no food that wasn't spoiled or high proof home brewed alcohol. Cyri had no intention of trying to obtain nutrition from liquor on an empty stomach, and so she pressed on. She was slipping up behind a large over muscled man holding a bowl with some sort of powder when somebody coughed loudly behind her. The man spun around, chainmail jangling and Cyri swung her tomahawk in a hasty chopping strike.

"She sent you! Didn't she?" The man growled as he clumsily blocked Cyri blow with a handmade machete.

"What?" Cyri asked as she regained her guard.

"Not enough to cut us off, take her butterflies back. Not enough to leave us to suffer without the butterfly insight. No, no, no. She had to send an assassin for vengeance against our revenge."

Cyri kicked her shin into the man's nethers and he dropped to the ground with another growl, dropping the blade. The man pushed himself into a backward roll and came up on his feet in the back room of the cavern. The room had two entrances, the door the man had just used and a large window looking out into the grey sky and pouring rain. He showed more skill and presence of mind than the others. And he had nearly two hundred pounds of muscle over Cyri. He was clearly suffering the withdrawal symptoms, but a lucky blow- especially with a bludgeon in hand would still put Cyri in the Great Serpent's realm with no trouble. She paused.

"You're the last one, you know," Cyri said, blocking the door through which she'd entered, "You can deal with me, or you can go out the window. You might survive the fall. I don't relish the idea of dying by exposure in the monsoon. But it's your choice.

"What do you want?" The man said.

"Answers."

"You're going to kill me when you're done right?"

"I am, but it will be quick and it will end the pain." Cyri answered.

"That's a handful of salt for comfort." The man said.

"You can jump," Cyri answered, "If you think it's a better offer."

The man shook his head, "Ask your questions."

"The woman whose farm you destroyed, she was your supplier- for your apothecary drug?"

He nodded, "My turn. She did send you after us, didn't she?"

Cyria considered not answering, but eventually nodded, "And the woman who sold you the zombie butterfly, you destroyed her farm. You did this in revenge, after she cut you off- wouldn't sell you the butterfly any longer. What happened?"

"We had an arrangement. We'd raid other farmsteads around her. She'd keep seeds and garden stuff. We'd get food and livestock. And she'd give us Zombie Butterfly. Some for us and some we'd sell. But people started putting the pieces together."

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

"People started figuring out hints that might tell them where the butterfly came from, or who cooked it. She didn't want that. So she cut us off, started rumors that sent people our way and kept her in the shadows."

"You didn't like that I imagine," Cyri said.

"She was using us as altar goats! Sacrifice us to keep her hands clean. So we said, fair's fair. If she weren't going to play fair, we weren't going to play fair either."

"And that's when you took your vengeance?"

"That's when we took her down. She weren't there, I don't know how she knew, but she must have. Didn't warn nobody else though."

Cyri tilted her head, "Explain."

"She had three husbands, they died defending her five kids. Died well. They were warriors- like you, like me. So that's why. Now I've told you. Hand me my chopper, it's time you killed me."

Cyri chuckled quietly and kicked the machete to the man. He picked up the blade and, stumbling only a little, charged her with a wordless war cry. Cyri dodged his feinted first blow and rammed a knee into his gut, and then slammed the top of her tomahawk into his jaw. She dropped the tomahawk and the man struggled to reposition. She reached back and pulled a hooked dagger with a hollow pommel from her belt and rammed it into the man's torso puncturing the chainmail rings, curling the strange blade into a lung by driving it through the stomach and diaphragm. Blood spilled out the hollow pommel, draining through a hole in the equally hollow blade. Cyri hated cleaning the blade, but it was a nasty end to any argument.

She leaped backwards, out of range of any dying blow. The huge man stumbled, his eyes rolled back in his head, and crashed heavily to the ground and slid until his now lifeless body came to rest in a crooked corner.

As she caught her breath, she heard clapping. Cyri turned and saw Seraphim and the Dragon Man blocking the door. Looking to the window she found Cinnamon coiling through the opening as the Bone Man stopped behind her crouching to block the way.

"What happened to the Cinder Scales?" She asked.

"We showed them your mother's gratitude," Cinnamon answered.

"You didn't kill my cassowary did you? I have to return it to its owner."

"Killing a beast of burden holds no interest to us," the Dragon Man said.

"So young protege," Seraphim said, "What shall we do now?"

"Actually," Cyri said pointing at the discarded bowl containing the powdery residue, "I was hoping Cinnamon would give me her expert opinion on the contents of that dish."

The four exchanged surprised looks, and then Cinnamon stepped forward.

5

Camel Spine Mountains, Second month of the Monsoon, 314 APW (After the Precursor War)

Cinnamon wiped her index finger along the bowl and touched the dry film to her tongue. She paused.

Cyri waited.

"Three primary component ingredients." Cinnamon said after brief consideration, "There's a psychedelic ingredient here. I suspect it may be a cactus that your mother's interrogators also grow."

"Side effects?" Cyri asked, "Withdrawal effects?"

"Virtually none. But it tends induce a certain talkative nature that the interrogators find helpful to their purposes."

"That can't be all of it. What of the other two ingredients?"

Cinnamon waved a finger as though to chastise Cyri and then continued, "Then there is the Yaupon black holly, a powerful stimulant. Withdrawal includes painful headaches and aggression issues. There is also something else. I suspect a coca derivative, although that would take quite the elaborate garden set up. Hyper aggression as a primary effect and painful and damaging withdrawal."

Cyri nodded, "The gardens they destroyed at the farm were impressive. I saw a number of buildings. I saw what might have even been the ruins of some glass gardens. More than enough to match what you're describing."

The Dragon Man grinned, "You speak of the person who sent you on this little mission of vengeance? Interesting. Where is she now?"

"I don't know. It's been months. I'm not tracker enough to find her trail when it's grown that cold."

Seraphim clucked his tongue, "You did not study with sufficient diligence."

"This is indeed interesting," The Bone Man said, "But not relevant. Our duty is to return to you to Lady Vanora."

Cyri looked up from Cinnamon, and her eyes darted as she appraised each of the four in turn. None had let down their guard. All her exits remained blocked, and posture indicated to Cyri that all were ready to draw their weapons before she could breathe in aggression. Cinnamon looked up, and all four returned her gaze, her former teachers turned opponents assessing her chances and her intent.

She nodded.

"I surrender."

"Oh?" The Dragon Man said, "Really? Just like that."

"Conditionally," Cyri said.

"Then state your conditions protege," Seraphim said.

"I cannot track this woman. I cannot find her after so long. I am not tracker enough."

"But we are," The Bone Man said and slowly blinked his eyes.

"But you are."

"Are we to hunt this woman down and kill her then?" The Bone Man asked.

"No," Cyri said, "I made her a promise. I must keep it. My condition is that you track her and take me to her, enable me to keep my promise."

"And then? Cinnamon asked.

"I will surrender to you," Cyri said to the assembled hunters, "I will not attempt to escape or to flee on the return trip back to mother's fortress. This is my promise, if you do this thing for me now."

"And after you reach her fortress?" Seraphim asked.

"Well, then you'll have done your duty, and any failure will belong to the castle guards and not yours certainly." Cyri answered.

The Dragon Man laughed and blew a ring of pipe smoke towards the ceiling, "And the we play our game again child."

"Perhaps." Cyri answered.

"And those are your conditions?" Cinnamon asked.

"And food," Cyri added, "I left the bazaar in somewhat of a hurry."

The hunters looked at each other, communications passed between them in some way that Cyri had never managed to decypher.

They held a collective gaze, and Cyri waited.

6

Northern Badlands, Second month of the Hot Winds, 314 APW (After the Precursor War)

The hut had been built from sod cut out of the badlands and used as a kind of brickwork, layers of sod earth piled like flat breads in a market. The door had been fabricated by stretching a oxhide across a frame of driftwood that had likely been scavenged from the shores of the nearby brackish inland sea.

Cyri pushed open the door and stepped inside, "I have found your family's killer,"

The woman in brown did not turn to face Cyri, "I see. And what do you plan to do?"

"I deal with parasites the same way every time," Cyri said as she drew her Tomahawk, "But this time, I do plan to make the last parasite suffer."

The woman nodded, "People do say that nothing can stop you."

Cyri took a step forward, "She took lives from family after family. And she will do it again, to other families trying to heal the wastelands."

The woman put down apothecary jars she had been washing as Cyri approached.

"She will tear away at those doing the work of the Precursors, and destroy those little spots of hope again and again."

The woman turned slowly and looked at Cyri. The woman's eyes were cold and dull; perhaps bored, perhaps dead already.

"You will have your vengeance," Cyri said, "although I know that's about the same comfort as a handful of salt for the thirsty."

Cyri paused.

After a moment the other woman nodded.

"Vengeance is a wagon wheel that rolls straight to the Blightlands."